

A VANISHING INDUSTRY

SHIPBUILDING

(From a 1923 clipping in Miss Marion Peterson's scrapbook.—Ed.)

We hear much from the older residents of Duxbury of the days of the shipping period, "When the bay was filled with vessels from nearly every port in the world."

Since the days of the Tercentenary we have been looking backward, let us hope, to gather strength for the future, that the quiet calm of Duxbury which we all love shall not degenerate into the sleep of indifference, but shall be of the kind that accomplishes results. We may yet build without the sound of axe or hammer. The following reminiscences written by Capt. John Bradford, thirty years ago will be of interest to the newer residents of Duxbury as well as to the numerous descendants of the one-hundred and nine sea-captains whose names are given here.

At the time when the poet nearest the heart of New England was singing his "songs of labor, the axes and mallets of many a busy shipyard in the little Massachusetts town of Duxbury were beating time to his measures, as the men who wielded them acted out the inspiring words of 'The Ship Builders'.

It is only those who swing those ponderous tools, or who dwell within the sound of their cheerful din, that can fully realize the contrast between that stirring era that, since the shipping industry died out, have slipped quietly, cluggishly along, like the tide in Duxbury's sedge checked channels.

We who know our Duxbury well in its present aspect are perhaps fond of saying that we love the dear old town just as it is; here we may be "far from the maddening crowd," and close to Nature in sea, and shore, and forest. The very thought of bustling, driving toll would spoil the charm.

But let some ancient mariner hold us "with his glittering eye" as he tells the tale of those palmy days when down these grassy slopes ship after ship was launched to help "to wind the silken chain of commerce 'round the world'". And how can we choose but hear?

Of the value of the work done in the Duxbury shipyards sufficient testimony has already been recorded: To speak of the character of the numerous first-class ships which have been built here would be to recall the names of the best mechanics and skilled artisans of the whole country.

To speak of the men who command those ships would be to make honorable mention of intelligent and eminent navigators who with the flag of the Republic at the masthead, guided their ships into nearly every commercial port of the habitable globe.

These personal reminiscences of one who can claim a modest place among these shipmasters, and whose memory extends back to about 1830 or 1832, are prefaced by brief historical notes gathered mainly from Winsor's History of Duxbury, published in 1849 and Goodwin's "The Pilgrim Republic" published in 1888.

Duxbury as a settlement is almost as old as its neighbor Plymouth for we learn that some of the earliest settlers of Plymouth soon after the "distribution of cattle" in 1627 found it necessary to extend their pasturage far beyond the sought room on the north side of the original limits, and in 1628 had already harbor within the borders of what is now Duxbury. For convenience in caring for the pastured animals the owners formed the habit of remaining here through the Summer months returning for the Winter to their Plymouth homes, that their connection with the church might not be broken.

It inevitably followed however that more substantial buildings were built on the northern shore and in 1637 the hamlet had so far grown with such proprietors as Standish, Brewster, Winalow, Alden, Howland, Soule, and Sampson as to petition the General Court of the Plymouth Colony for incorporation as a new township to be named by Myles Standish Duxbury.

Reluctantly the conservatives, who dreaded this breaking asunder of church ties, granted the petition, and so the separate existence of the town began. Its boundaries were not fixed until later at that time it included much that is now a part of neighboring towns. Winalow had a farm at Green Harbor, and it is recorded by Goodwin that "It was thought that no one would want to live so far from Plymouth permanently." We also learn that Duxbury from the first attracted a fine class of residents through the superior fertility of its soil to that of Plymouth. This applied especially to the part first settled, known as "The Nook."

By degrees the needs of the people gave rise to new branches of industry, but we find no record of what was the leading business of the town prior to the year 1720 about which time Thomas Prince is said to have established the first yard within its limits for the building of vessels on the "westerly shore of the Nook at the foot of Captain's Hill."